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## REMINISCENCES OF PLATO IN GOETHE'S FAUST

## I

Among the enigmatic portions of the Second Part of Goethe's *Faust* few passages have given the interpreters greater troubles than the introductory soliloquy of *Faust*. These troubles have manifested themselves not so much in a variety of explanatory theories as in a certain vagueness concerning the real significance and meaning of the scene. To be sure some of the recent interpreters of the soliloquy speak of its wistful symbolism but they fail to explain unequivocally what the poet wished to convey by it and, what is of equal importance, how he came to employ this mode of representation. For it is from the poet's innermost bent of mind as revealed in the character and purpose of his artistic expressions that the interpretation must start.

A mere glance at Goethe's utterances, both poetic and scientific, during the second half of his life will disclose the eminent position which symbolism occupied in his thought, symbolism not only as a means of artistic representation but also as a key to the understanding of the secret of the world. In one of his scientific papers of the year 1823<sup>1</sup> he confesses: "Nach meiner Art zu forschen, zu wissen und zu geniessen darf ich mich nur an Symbole halten," adopting as a motto for his own scientific attempts Thomas Campanella's significant words: "Natura infinita est, sed qui symbola animadverterit omnia intelliget licet non omnino."<sup>2</sup>

In view of the importance which Goethe thus attaches to the symbol it is highly instructive to hear his explanation of the process of symbolization whose nature and function he tried to fathom by unceasing observation and reflection. "Das ist die wahre Symbolik," he tells us, "wo das Besondere das Allgemeine repräsentirt, nicht als Traum und Schatten, sondern als augenblickliche Offenbarung des Unerforschlichen."<sup>3</sup> How the

<sup>1</sup> *Die Lepaden, Goethe's Werke XXXIII*, 289 (Hempel).

<sup>2</sup> *Werke*, XXXIV, 93 (H).

<sup>3</sup> *Sprüche in Prosa* No. 273 (H).

single sensual phenomenon, the careful and exact observation of which constitutes Goethe's objective mode of thinking (gegenständliches Denken) can reveal to him its ideal significance (das Allgemeine), he describes in a letter to Schiller.<sup>4</sup> "Symbolisch," he says, "sind eminente Fälle, die in einer charakteristischen Manigfaltigkeit als Repräsentanten von vielen anderen dastehen, eine gewisse Totalität in sich schließen, eine gewisse Reihe fordern, Aehnliches und Fremdes in meinem Geiste aufregen und so, von aussen wie von innen, an eine gewisse Einheit und Allheit Anspruch machen." Again he touches upon the problem of the unity of the sensual and the ideal encompassed in the symbol in the following passage, indicating at the same time what distinguishes the symbol from the allegory: "Ein Symbol . . . ist die Sache, ohne die Sache zu sein, und doch die Sache, ein im geistigen Spiegel zusammengezogenes Bild und doch mit dem Gegenstande identisch. Wie weit steht nicht dagegen Allegorie zurück; sie ist vielleicht geistreich witzig, aber doch meist rhetorisch und conventionell und immer besser, je mehr sie sich demjenigen nähert was wir Symbol nennen. Man erlaube uns diesen Sprachgebrauch und jeder bilde sich den seinigen, nur mache er sich verständlich, da ohnehin das, worauf es ankommt, mit Worten gar nicht auszusprechen ist."<sup>5</sup>

It is evident from the preceding passages that the symbol as the instantaneous manifestation of the inscrutable (das Unerforschliche), the synthesis of the inner and the exterior in organic unity, is to Goethe a manifestation of the truth itself which, being godlike, does not appear immediately but is to be divined from its revelations.<sup>6</sup> We are in a position to follow how Goethe, the great "visualist" who by nature was ever averse to mere "separating and reckoning,"<sup>7</sup> arrived by the observation of the genesis of the symbol at his genetic method of scientific research which led him to a series of remarkable discoveries.

<sup>4</sup> August 17, 1796.

<sup>5</sup> *Werke* I, 49, 142 (Weimar edition).

<sup>6</sup> *Sprüche in Prosa* No. 430. "Das Wahre ist gottähnlich; es erscheint nicht unmittelbar, wir müssen es aus seinen Manifestationen erraten."

<sup>7</sup> "Trennen und Zählen lag nicht in meiner Natur."

It is, however, in the realm of art and literature and especially of poetry, the real homeland of the symbol, where the full significance of Goethe's symbolism comes to view. To him art and science, poetry and philosophy were not separate domains, but he believed in their ultimate union of which he himself was one of the foremost representatives. Speaking of the disfavor with which his early morphological studies were received, he says:<sup>8</sup> "Nirgends wollte man zugeben, dass Wissenschaft und Poesie vereinbar seien. Man vergass, dass Wissenschaft sich aus Poesie entwickelt habe; man bedachte nicht, dass nach einem Umschwung von Zeiten beide sich wieder freundlich, zu beiderseitigem Vorteil, auf höherer Stelle gar wol wieder begegnen können." There is no question that the "higher place" where both activities of the human mind would meet as on common ground was, according to Goethe's opinion, *truth*. To dive as a scientist into the secrets of nature concealed in the visible phenomena, was to him identical with the maturest efforts of the artist and poet: "so ruht der *Stil* auf den tiefsten Grundfesten der Erkenntniss, auf dem *Wesen der Dinge*, insofern uns erlaubt ist, es in sichtbaren und greiflichen *Gestalten* zu erkennen."<sup>9</sup> In both activities the poet makes use of the symbol as the means of presenting the insight gained into the essence of things. Or, in Schiller's words: "Selbst die erhabenste 'Philosophie des Lebens' würde ein solcher (Volks) Dichter in die einfachen Gefühle der Natur auflösen, die Resultate des mühsamsten Forschens der Einbildungskraft überliefern und die Geheimnisse des Denkers in leicht zu entziffernder Bildersprache dem Kindersinn zu erraten geben."<sup>10</sup>

Both Goethe and Schiller seem to be aware that symbolism, the synthesis of the subjective and the objective, the spiritual and the material in the poetic image, constitutes in the last analysis the rudimentary vital element of all poetry, as it lies at the root also of speech, mythology and metaphysics. Goethe's conception of the nature and function of the aesthetic symbol finds its best expression in one of his *Sprüche in Prosa*:<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Geschichte meines botanischen Studiums. Werke*, XXXIII, 80. (H).

<sup>9</sup> *Werke* XXIV, 527 (H).

<sup>10</sup> *Ueber Bürgers Gedichte*.

<sup>11</sup> No. 743 (H).

"Die Symbolik verwandelt die Erscheinung in Idee, die Idee in ein Bild und so, dass die Idee im Bild immer unendlich wirksam und unerreichbar bleibt und, selbst in allen Sprachen ausgesprochen, doch unaussprechlich bliebe."

It is in the light of the preceding discussion that the interpreter must approach the symbolism of Faust's soliloquy in the opening scene of the Second Part, a symbolism less sublime and dramatic perhaps than that of the Prologue in Heaven, but of equally great significance for the development of the hero in the second half of the play. Taken in its outward literal meaning the soliloquy presents a description of a magnificent alpine scene in the early dawn of a summer morning and of the subsequent sunrise during which Faust, blinded by the light breaking forth from the recesses of the sky, turns aside to rest his eyes on the color spectacle of a rainbow, caused by the mist of a nearby waterfall.

Faust's words, however, are more than mere description. What constitutes their symbolism is revealed in his apostrophe to the rising sun which, at this moment of supreme ecstasy, becomes to him a symbol of the deity, the source of absolute truth which he desires to behold face to face. To comprehend the full significance of Faust's wish we should remember how Goethe, who speaks here through Faust, always venerated and almost deified and worshipped the sun, his "Godess" (Faust I, l. 1084). "Fragt man mich," he said to Eckermann a few days before his death, "ob es in meiner Natur sei die Sonne zu verehren, so sage ich: durchaus. Denn sie ist (wie Christus) eine Offenbarung des Höchsten, und zwar die mächtigste, die uns Erdenkindern wahrzunehmen vergönnt ist. *Ich an bete in Ihr das Licht und die zeugende Kraft Gottes*, wodurch allein wir leben, weben und sind."<sup>12</sup> Another passage in which light is

<sup>12</sup> The idea that in the sunlight we have a manifestation of the deity we meet as early as the 13th century, as also in Luther. See *Das Passional, Eine Legendensammlung des dreizehnten Jahrhunderts* (ed. F. K. Köpke):

die gottheit, der sunnenschin,

and Luther 5, 417 (Jena 1557):

Darumb gibt allein die Sonn den nutz (des die Welt voll ist, und nicht bezalen kan) das alle Thier und Mensch sein Nahrung suchen kan, und dazu hitze und werme, das es lebendig bleibt, wechset, zunimpt und nicht vergehet. Summa: Es ist nicht auszuzelen, was Gott alle stund und augenblick durch die Sonn für woltat gibt.

identified with the "highest energy" elucidates still further his conception of the manifestation of the divine in this phenomenon. Speaking of the extreme satisfaction which Hegel's approval of his theory of colors had given him he says: "Und hierdurch war mir vollkommen vergönnt *das geheimeisvoll klare Licht, als die höchste Energie, ewig, einzig und unteilbar zu betrachten.*"<sup>13</sup>

What Goethe here is permitted to perceive is one of the "primal phenomena" (Urphänomene) as he calls certain physical and ethical phenomena, because "nothing lies above them that becomes visible, and beyond them the mind cannot penetrate." Instead of going into a detailed discussion of this important conception of Goethe's later years, a few pertinent passages from his writings and conversations may suffice to illuminate the significance which Goethe attached to the Urphänomen.

"Das Höchste wozu der Mensch gelangen kann," he said to Eckermann, "ist das Erstaunen; und wenn ihn das Urphänomen in Erstaunen setzt, so sei er zufrieden; ein Höheres kann es ihm nicht gewähren, und ein Weiteres soll er nicht dahinter suchen; hier ist die Grenze."<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in another passage of Eckermann's Conversations,<sup>15</sup> we are told that it is in reality the deity which is concealed behind them and which manifests itself in them. "Der Verstand reicht nur zur Natur hinauf, der Mensch muss fähig sein, sich zur höchsten *Vernunft* erheben zu können, um an die Gottheit zu rühren, die sich in Urphänomenen, physischen wie sittlichen, offenbart, *hinter denen sie sich hält und die von ihr ausgehen.*"

There is no question in my mind that Faust in the present scene finds himself face to face with the Urphänomen of eternal light and the lines 4702-4715 present in sublime poetic diction what Goethe, the scientist, expressed in the following words: "Wir sind aber schon weit genug gegen die Natur vorgedrungen, wenn wir zu den Urphänomenen gelangen, welche wir in ihrer unerforschlichen Herrlichkeit von Angesicht zu Angesicht anschauen und uns sodann wieder rückwärts in die Welt der

<sup>13</sup> *Annalen, Werke XXVII*, 234 (H).

<sup>14</sup> *Gespräche mit Goethe*, Eckermann, Febr. 18, 1829.

<sup>15</sup> 13 Februar, 1829.

Erscheinungen wenden, wo das in seiner Einfalt Unbegreifliche sich in tausend mannichfaltigen Erscheinungen bei aller Veränderlichkeit unveränderlich offenbart.<sup>16</sup>

Not only does Faust, overcome by the sight of the eternal light, turn to the world of phenomena back of him, he stands aghast (betroffen) as the sea of fire with joy and pain envelops him, thus reminding us of the description which Goethe in the Sprüche in Prosa gives of the effect of the primal phenomenon:<sup>17</sup> "Das unmittelbare Gewährwerden der Urphaenomene versetzt uns in eine Art von *Angst*, wir fühlen unsere Unzulänglichkeit; nur durch das ewige Spiel der Empirie belebt, erfreuen sie uns."

It is, however, not in these concomitant effects of the primal phenomenon of eternal light but in the fact that to Faust's mind it symbolizes absolute truth where lies the deepest significance of our scene. Faust's ultimate purpose of gazing into the original fountain of light is revealed in the line:

Des *Lebens* Fackel wollten wir entzünden.

To understand the meaning of these words a passage in Goethe's poem "Ilmenau" in which the poet, like Faust, compares his own highest efforts to the supreme feat of Prometheus:

Ich brachte reines Feuer vom Altar,  
Was ich entzündet, ist nicht reine Flamme.

With the same Promethean spirit with which Faust, the truthseeker, once challenged the Earthspirit amidst flashing flames, he now dares to penetrate into the very source of light, there to come face to face with the bare, absolute truth, in the sight of which he hopes to find the consummation of life. Uncompromising in his quest, like the philosopher in Schiller's profound verses "Die Poesie des Lebens," who exclaims "*entblösst* muss ich die Wahrheit sehen," Faust meets with essentially the same result as the abstract thinker. While the latter, having divested life of its veil of rosecolored illusion (Schein), discovers that the world is nothing but a huge grave and is seized by inner petrification, Faust is blinded by the rays of the sun and with aching eyes turns away from the sea of flame. Not, however, in utter despair as after the rebuff of the Earthspirit, but in the spirit of resignation: from the portals of the

<sup>16</sup> *Werke* XXXIII, 378 (H).

<sup>17</sup> No. 789 (H).





Umher verbreitend duftig kühle Schauer!  
Der spiegelt ab das menschliche Bestreben,  
Ihm sinne nach und du begreifst genauer:  
*Am farbigen Abglanz haben wir das Leben.*

If the profound meaning of the last line need further interpretation it is contained in Schiller's famous distich "Licht und Farbe":<sup>18</sup>

Wohne, du ewiglich Eines, dort bei dem ewiglich Einen,  
Farbe, du wechselnde, komm freundlich zum Menschen herab.

<sup>18</sup> Since the conception of the aesthetic illusion (Schein) is of vital importance also in Schiller's philosophy of art and life, a significant passage from his discussion of this conception in his "*Briefe über die aesthetische Erziehung des Menschen*" (26. Brief) may be in place here:

"Es versteht sich von selbst, dass hier nur vom dem *aesthetischen Schein* die Rede ist, den man von der *Wirklichkeit* und Wahrheit unterscheidet, nicht von dem *logischen*, den man mit derselben verwechselt—den man folglich liebt, weil er Schein ist, und nicht weil man ihn für etwas Besseres hält. . . . Den Schein der ersten Art für etwas gelten lassen, kann der Wahrheit niemals Eintrag tun, weil man nie Gefahr läuft, ihn derselben unterzuschieben, was doch die einzige Art ist, wie der Wahrheit geschadet werden kann; ihn verachten, heisst alle schöne Kunst überhaupt verachten, deren Wesen der Schein ist. . . .

Die Natur selbst ist es, die den Menschen von der Realität zum Scheine emporhebt, indem sie ihn mit zwei Sinnen ausrüstete, *die ihn bloss durch den Schein zur Erkenntniss des Wirklichen führen*. In dem *Auge* und in dem *Ohr* ist die andringende Materie schon hinweg gewälzt von den Sinnen, und das Object entfernt sich von uns, das wir in den tierischen Sinnen unmittelbar berühren. Was wir durch das Auge *sehen*, ist von dem verschieden, was wir *empfinden*: denn der Verstand springt über das Licht hinaus zu den Gegenständen. Der Gegenstand des Takts (Gefühls) ist eine Gewalt, die wir *erleiden*, der Gegenstand des Auges und des Ohrs *ist eine Form, die wir erzeugen*. So lange der Mensch noch ein Wilder ist, genießt er bloss mit den Sinnen des Gefühls, denen die Sinne des Scheins in dieser Periode bloss dienen. Er erhebt sich gar nicht : um Sehen, oder er befriedigt sich doch nicht mit demselben. Sobald er anfängt, mit dem Auge zu genießen, und das Sehen für ihn einen selbstständigen Wert erlangt, so ist er auch schon aesthetisch frei."

It is especially in art and poetry (die Kunst des Scheins) where "illusion" becomes the medium of conveying the highest attainable truth. "Die wahre Kunst," says Schiller in the preface to his "Braut von Messina," "kann sich nicht bloss mit dem Schein der Wahrheit begnügen: auf der Wahrheit selbst, auf dem festen und tiefen Grunde der Natur errichtet sie ihr *ideales* Gebäude. Die Natur selbst ist nur eine Idee des Geistes, die nie in die Sinne fällt. Unter der Decke der Erscheinungen liegt sie, aber sie selbst kommt niemals zur Erscheinung. Bloss der Kunst des Ideals (Scheins) ist es verliehen oder vielmehr aufgegeben diesen *Geist des Alls* zu ergreifen und in einer körperlichen Form zu binden . . . sie kann dadurch *wahrer sein als alle Wirklichkeit und realer als alle Erfahrung*."

That the reflected glory (*Abglanz*) in which alone we have life is, in the last analysis, the reflex of the deity, finds expression in a remarkable stanza of the "Vorspiel zur Eröffnung des Weimarischen Theaters" 1807:

So im Kleinen, ewig wie im Grossen  
Wirkt Natur, wirkt Menscheng Geist, und beide  
Sind *ein Abglanz jenes Urlichts droben*,  
Das *unsichtbar* alle Welt erleuchtet.<sup>19</sup>

## II

The student of Plato who has followed the preceding discussion may perhaps have noticed an inner agreement and spiritual relationship between the symbolism of Goethe's contemplation of the world and the fundamental principles of the thought of the Greek philosopher, even before I proceed to point them out in a specific and significant instance. Many as are the points of contact between the two master-minds it seems remarkable that a comprehensive study of their relationship has as yet not been made. Of all the biographers of Goethe it is only Houston Stewart Chamberlain who, in his masterly work, fully aware of the difference of character and of historical conditions which separates the two thinkers, has placed them side by side as the most powerful and influential intellectual forces which the world has witnessed.

Judging from two of the letters which Goethe wrote to Herder shortly after his return from Strassburg, we shall not go amiss by assuming that the impulse to a deeper study of Plato was given him by the man to whom he owed the great awakening of his genius and who was one of the first to recognize that Plato's "ideas" were not mere abstract notions but "schaffend und wirkend." Not until much later, however, during the period of his intense scientific studies, do we hear again that Plato's writings seriously engage Goethe's attention. In

<sup>19</sup> It is a remarkable fact that a similar thought, resulting from similar experiences, occurs already in Heinrich Seuse, one of the German mystics of the 14th century: "Aber die gotes freund die meinend er, als sy söllend; und mügend sie der sunnen glanz nit ansehen, so gassen sie doch an der sunnen widerglancz uff den hohen bergen." See Wilhelm Preger, *Die Briefe Heinrich Susos*, Leipzig 1867; p. 40.

February 1793 he writes to F. H. Jacobi, an enthusiastic admirer of the Greek philosopher: "Seit einigen Tagen habe ich gleichsam zum ersten Mal im Plato gelesen, und zwar das Gastmal, Phädrus und die Apologie. Wie wunderbar mir dieser fürtreffliche Mann vorkommt, möchte ich Dir erzählen." Again in November 1804, shortly before he concluded his "Theory of Colors" he writes to Windischmann, the physicist: "Die mir früher bekannte Uebersetzung des Timaeus habe ich mit ihren Zugaben wiederholt gelesen und mich dabei gleicher und ähnlicher Gesinnungen gefreut. Wie angenehm muss es mir sein, wenn dasjenige, was ich im einzelnen Schauen, im Ahnden und Hoffen lange für wahr gehalten, nun auch im allgemeinen An- und Ueberschauen gültig bleibt." In April 1805 Goethe began dictating his "Geschichte der Farbenlehre" in which the following unexcelled characterization of Plato occurs: "Plato verhält sich zu der Welt wie ein seliger Geist, dem es beliebt, einige Zeit auf ihr zu herbergen. Es ist ihm nicht sowol darum zu tun, sie kennen zu lernen, weil er sie schon voraussetzt, als ihr dasjenige, was er mitbringt und was ihr so not tut, freundlich mitzuteilen. Er dringt in die Tiefen, mehr um sie mit seinem Wesen auszufüllen, als um sie zu erforschen. Er bewegt sich nach der Höhe, mit Sehnsucht, seines Ursprungs wieder theilhaftig zu werden. Alles was er äussert, bezieht sich auf ein ewiges Ganzes, Gutes, Wahres, Schönes, dessen Forderung er in jedem Busen aufzuregen strebt."

Nowhere has Plato expressed his yearning for the lofty regions whence he took his origin more strikingly than in the famous allegory of the Cave at the beginning of the seventh book of his "Republic." Again it seems quite probable that this allegory was vividly called to Goethe's attention for the first time through Herder,<sup>20</sup> the avowed enemy of all abstract knowledge, who refers to it with telling effect in his essay, "Ueber den Ursprung der Sprache," the very book which Goethe read "mit grossem Vergnügen und zu meiner besonderen

<sup>20</sup> That Herder was particularly fond of Plato's simile is shown by the frequent allusions which he makes to it in his writings. See *Herder's Lebensbild* I, 3, 2, 233; Werke (Supphon) V, 95, 388; VII 7; XX, 117. Cf. also A. G. Kaestner, *Vermischte Schriften* II, 113.

Kräftigung" in manuscript during his memorable intercourse with Herder at Strassburg.

As the analogy between the Faust scene under discussion and Plato's parable has not been pointed out before I shall, for the purpose of convenient comparison, quote the latter in the translation of A. D. Lindsay.<sup>21</sup>

"Then after this," I said, "liken our nature in its education and want of education to a condition which I may thus describe. Picture men in an underground cave-dwelling, with a long entrance reaching up towards the light along the whole width of the cave; in this they lie from their childhood, their legs and necks in chains, so that they stay where they are and look only in front of them, as the chain prevents them turning their heads round. Some way off, and higher up, a fire is burning behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners is a road on higher ground. Imagine a wall built along this road, like the screens which showmen have in front of the audience, over which they show the puppets."

"I have it," he said.

"Then picture also men carrying along this wall all kinds of articles which overtop it, statues of men and other creatures in stone and wood and other materials; naturally some of the carriers are speaking, others are silent."

"A strange image and strange prisoners," he said.

"They are like ourselves," I answered. "For in the first place, do you think that such men would have seen anything of themselves or of each other except the shadows thrown by the fire on the wall of the cave opposite to them?"

"How could they," he said, "if all their life they had been forced to keep their heads motionless?"

"What would they have seen of the things carried along the wall? Would it not be the same?"

"Surely."

"Then if they were able to talk with one another, do you think that they would suppose what they saw to be the real things?"

"Necessarily."

"Then what if there were in their prison an echo from the opposite wall? When any one of those passing by spoke, do you imagine that they could help thinking that the voice came from the shadow passing before them?"

"No, certainly not," he said.

"Then most assuredly," I said, "the only truth that such men would conceive would be the shadows of those manufactured articles?"

"That is quite inevitable," he said.

"Then consider," I said, "the manner of their release from their bonds and the cure of their folly, supposing that they attained their natural destiny in some such way as this. Let us suppose one of them released, and forced

<sup>21</sup> *The Republic of Plato*. Translated into English by A. D. Lindsay. London, 1908.

suddenly to stand up and turn his head, and walk and look towards the light. Let us suppose also that all these actions gave him pain, and that he was too dazzled to see the objects whose shadows he had been watching before. What do you think he would say if he were told by some one that before he had been seeing foolish phantoms, while now he was nearer to being, and was turned to what in a higher degree is, and was looking more directly at it? And further, if each of the several figures passing by were pointed out to him, and he were asked to say what each was, do you not think that he would be perplexed, and would imagine that the things he had seen before were truer than those now pointed out to him?"

"Yes, much truer," he said.

"Then if he were forced to look at the light itself, would not his eyes ache, and would he not try to escape and turn back to things which he could look at and think that they were really more distinct than the things shown him?"

"Yes," he said.

"But," I said, "if some one were to drag him out up the steep and rugged ascent, and did not let go till he had been dragged up to the light of the sun, would not his forced journey be one of pain and annoyance; and when he came to the light, would not his eyes be so full of the glare that he would not be able to see a single one of the objects we now call true?"

"Certainly, not all at once," he said.

"Yes, I fancy that he would need time before he could see things in the world above. At first he would most easily see shadows, then the reflections in water of men and everything else, and, finally, the things themselves. After that he could look at the heavenly bodies and the sky itself by night, turning his eyes to the light of the stars and the moon more easily than to the sun or to the sun's light by day?"

"Surely."

"Then, last of all, I fancy he would be able to look at the sun and observe its nature, not its appearances in water or on alien material, but the very sun itself in its own place?"

"Inevitably," he said.

"And that done, he would then come to infer concerning it that it is the sun which produces the seasons and years, and controls everything in the sphere of the visible, and is in a manner the author of all those things which he and his fellow-prisoners used to see?"

"It is clear that this will be his next conclusion," he said.

"Well, then, if he is reminded of his original abode and its wisdom, and those who were then his fellow-prisoners, do you not think that he will pity them and count himself happy in the change?"

"Certainly."

"Now suppose that those prisoners had had among themselves a system of honours and commendations, that prizes were granted to the man who had the keenest eye for passing objects and the best memory for which usually came first, and which second, and which came together, and who could most cleverly conjecture from this what was likely to come in the future, do you think that our friend would think longingly of those prizes and envy the men whom the

prisoners honour and set in authority? Would he not rather feel what Homer describes, and wish extremely

‘To live on earth a swain,  
Or serve a swain for hire,’

or suffer anything rather than be so the victim of seeming and live in their way?”

“Yes,” he said, “I certainly think that he would endure anything rather than that.”

“Then consider this point,” I said. “If this man were to descend again and take his seat in his old place, would not his eyes be full of darkness because he had just come out of the sunlight?”

“Most certainly,” he said.

“And suppose that he had again to take part with the prisoners there in the old contest of distinguishing between the shadows, while his sight was confused and before his eyes had got steady (and it might take them quite a considerable time to get used to the darkness), would not men laugh at him, and say that having gone up above he had come back with his sight ruined, so that it was not worth while even to try to go up? And do you not think that they would kill him who tried to release them and bear them up, if they could lay hands on him, and slay him?”

“Certainly,” he said.

“Now this simile, my dear Glaucon, must be applied in all its parts to what we said before; the sphere revealed to sight being likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire therein to the power of the sun. If you will set the upward ascent and the seeing of things in the upper world with the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible sphere, you will have my surmise; and that is what you are anxious to have. Whether it be actually true, God knows. But this is how it appears to me. In the world of knowledge the Form of the good is perceived last and with difficulty, but when it is seen it must be inferred that it is the cause of all that is right and beautiful in all things, producing in the visible world light and the lord of light, and being itself lord in the intelligible world and the giver of truth and reason, and this Form of the good must be seen by whosoever would act wisely in public or in private.”

Similarities as well as dissimilarities between this parable and the Faust scene under discussion are obvious.

Considering the resemblances first, it does not seem improbable that the very thought of having Faust ascend the solitary alpine heights in search of regeneration, culminating in the vision of the eternal light, may have been suggested by the picture which Socrates, interrupting his profound disquisition upon the nature of the Good, draws of the man dragged up a steep, rugged ascent there to behold the light of the sun. Again in the sublime Platonic conception of the sun as a simile of the idea of the Good, the ultimate cause of the visible world and of our knowledge, Goethe may well have recognized the verifica-

tion of his long-cherished conviction that the absolute truth, symbolized in the sun is accessible to us only through the medium of its reflected radiance in the image, the Schein. Moreover, we may easily recognize a certain relationship between Goethe's primal phenomenon and the Platonic theory of ideas.<sup>22</sup> Finally, there is an unmistakable parallelism in the fact that both, Faust and the truth-seeker in Plato's parable, are dazzled by the light and, with aching eyes, turn back, the latter "to the things which he can look at" and the former to hide himself in the "veil<sup>23</sup> of childhood."

At this point, however, a marked difference in the subsequent attitude of the two becomes apparent, a difference which in the last analysis goes back to the diverse ways in which life and the world are viewed by Plato and Goethe.

There can be no question that there runs a strain of pessimism and ascetic renunciation through Plato's thought which reverberates in the doctrines of the mediaeval Church as well as in the ethical views of certain protestant denominations. This beautiful, sunny world, a place of bliss to the average Greek, appears in our parable as a deep, gloomy cave filled with prisoners whose necks and legs are in chains and who can see only the shadows thrown against the wall before them. If one of these prisoners by chance gains his freedom and after laborious efforts comes to see the real light and the real objects, he will pity his former fellow sufferers and refuse to go back to the world of shadows. In case he were forced, however, again to descend to the cave his eyes would be full of darkness and unable to distinguish between the shadows.

According to this view only the philosopher and the few whom he may rescue from the cave attain the enjoyment of light and truth, while the great multitude of men, a sort of massa perditionis, remain in the bonds of the perishable world of the senses. To be sure, Plato insists that the leadership of his Utopian state should be placed into the hands of the philosophers, but it is only by compulsion that they leave the imaginary

<sup>22</sup> This relationship has been ably discussed in Elizabeth Rotten's instructive study *Goethe's Urphänomen und die platonische Idee*, Giessen, 1913.

<sup>23</sup> It may be worthy of note that Plato in two passages of the *Republic* uses the figure of the "veil" (παρακάλυπτειν), IV, 439 E, VI, 503A, though not in the symbolic sense of Goethe.

islands of the blest on which they dwell in order to descend again to the prisoners and to share with them in toils and honors. This aloofness from the world which differs little from the claims of sanctity of certain religious sects has its ultimate basis in Plato's disdain of the senses. To rely on them for the knowledge of truth means to be deluded by them, for according to the *Phaedo*<sup>24</sup> "the eyes, and the ears and the other senses are full of deceit." Philosophy, therefore, urges the soul "to withdraw from them and to concentrate itself within itself, trusting nothing but itself and its own abstract thought of abstract existence."

We may interpret it as almost a rebuke of Plato's one-sided intellectualism when Goethe says in the "Sprüche in Prosa" (No. 557): "Die Sinne trügen nicht, aber das Urteil trügt," or when in the poem "Vermächtnis" he bequeaths to posterity the advice:

Den Sinnen hast du dann zu trauen,  
Kein Falsches lassen sie dich schauen,  
Wenn dein Verstand dich wach erhält.

Believing with Schiller that the way to the deity lies open to man through his senses, how could the poet, whose thought revolved around the central idea of "Life, the highest gift of God and Nature," have accepted a contemplation of the world which ultimately resulted in the stagnation and negation of life? Was it not Faust's painful experience of such inner stagnation which drove him to the outburst:

Mir ekelt lange vor allem Wissen!

What he seeks now in the presence of the eternal light is not philosophical knowledge in the sense of Plato's "ideas" but the vital flame of light on which he might kindle the torch of his own life. Thwarted in his design by the overpowering flame he resolutely turns his back to the sun, not to return to his previous state of captivity, like Plato's cave dweller, but to view with growing rapture the most beautiful of sense-illusions, the changeful, yet continuous, many-colored bow, and to discover that life is revealed only in the brilliant play of colors before him, the reflection of the one eternal light.

In one of the "Sprüche in Prosa" (No. 1003) Goethe has attempted to give an explanation of the secret of life whose

<sup>24</sup> *Phaedo* 83, A.



essential form of manifestation he saw in continuous motion. "Das Höchste," he says, "was wir von Gott und der Natur erhalten haben, ist das Leben, die rotirende Bewegung der Monas um sich selbst, die weder Rast noch Ruhe kennt. Der Trieb das Leben zu hegen und zu pflegen ist einem jeden unverwüstlich eingeboren, Die Eigentümlichkeit desselben jedoch bleibt uns und andern ein Geheimniss."

How intimately colors, motion and life are interwoven is exquisitely expressed in one of Goethe's early poems, "Die Freuden," a masterpiece of poetic symbolism:

Es flattert um die Quelle  
Die wechselnde Libelle,  
Mich freut sie lange schon;  
Bald dunkel und bald helle,  
Wie der Chamäleon,  
Bald rot, bald blau,  
Bald blau, bald grün;  
O dass ich in der Nähe  
Doch ihre Farben sähe!

Sie schwirrt und schwebet, rastet nie!  
Doch still, sie setzt sich an die Weiden.  
Da hab ich sie! Da hab ich sie!  
Und nun betracht' ich sie genau,  
Und seh' ein traurig dunkles Blau—

So geht es dir, "Zergliederer" deiner Freuden!

The beautiful play of colors of the dragon fly appears and remains only so long as the latter enjoys its life of free motion. To arrest this motion of life with clumsy hands means to destroy the colors, the beauty (*Schein*), coexistent with life, and what is left to the analyzer is nothing but a "sadly dark blue"—the lifeless "Ding an sich" after which abstract philosophy chases. In a remarkable passage of a letter written almost contemporaneously with this last poem, Goethe touches upon the same essential unity of life and beauty for which he uses the twilight as a symbol: "O, meine Freudinn," he writes, "das *Licht* ist die Wahrheit, doch die Sonne ist nicht die Wahrheit, von der doch das Licht quillt. Die Nacht ist Unwahrheit. Und was ist Schönheit? Sie ist nicht Licht und nicht Nacht, *Dämmerung*; eine Geburt von Wahrheit und Unwahrheit."

We can well understand that, many as were the points of contact and agreement between Goethe, the scientist and thinker, and Plato, he could not, as a poet, assent to the latter's abstract intellectualism, nor to his ethical ideal of pessimistic quietism. It is true that Plato's "ideas" are not mere abstract notions lacking activity and productiveness, yet they are, after all, like the "Mothers" to whom Faust descends, phantoms dwelling in the infinite, "life's pictures, restless, yet devoid of life." The conception of life which occupies the center of gravity in Goethe's inner world is, on the other hand, an ever active creative force, the direct manifestation of the divine, or as he has it in the wonderfully profound lines already quoted:

So im Kleinem, ewig wie im Grossen  
Wirkt *Natur*, wirkt *Menschengeist* und beide  
Sind ein *Abglanz* jenes *Urlichts* droben,  
Das *unsichtbar* alle Welt erleuchtet.

It is from the experience of this sacred spirit of life and its infinite manifestations that Goethe drew his sublime message that man is chosen to be a creator who, in the human sphere, is to continue and to perfect God's creation, a message greater than which was not given to humanity either before or after Goethe.

Weltseele, komm, uns zu durchdringen!  
Dann mit dem Weltgeist selbst zu ringen,  
Wird unsrer Kräfte Hochberuf.  
Teilnehmend führen gute Geister,  
Gelinde leitend, höchste Meister,  
Zu dem, der Alles schafft und schuf.

Und umzuschaffen das Geschaffne,  
Damit sichs nicht zum Starren waffne,  
Wirkt ewiges lebendiges Tun.  
Und was nicht war, nun will es werden,  
Zu reinen Sonnen, farbigen Erden,  
In keinem Falle darf es ruhn.

Es soll sich regen, schaffend handeln,  
Erst sich gestalten, dann verwandeln,  
Nur scheinbar stets Momente still.  
Das Ewige regt sich fort in Allen:  
Denn Alles muss in Nichts zerfallen,  
Wenn es im Sein beharren will.

JULIUS GOEBEL.